

21.12.13

12 Senator S.Y. Mézec of the Chief Minister regarding the Island's foodbanks (OQ.249/2021):

Following reports that the demand for one of the Island's foodbanks has risen by nearly 130 per cent in the last 2 years, will the Chief Minister provide his assessment of this development, particularly in respect of whether Jersey's welfare system is providing an adequate safety net for Islanders who fall into poverty?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré (The Chief Minister):

I am extremely grateful to all voluntary organisations who provide help to others within the community. The Senator has asked me for my assessment and I consider that Jersey's welfare system does provide an adequate safety net for low-income Islanders. We all recognise that the COVID-19 pandemic has created a number of challenges for all Islanders and it may be that assistance provided during the pandemic as co-ordinated, for example, by the Government's Connect Me initiative has increased awareness of the existence of food and other support available from Jersey's charitable sector. It is also important to note that Jersey's foodbank network is more accessible than the U.K. (United Kingdom) as, unlike the U.K., Islanders do not need to be referred by Citizens Advice to receive a temporary voucher to use a foodbank. Income support is available to anyone who has lived in Jersey for at least 5 years and provides a means-tested benefit system based on household income to help with daily living costs, including utilities and rental costs and provides additional payments to help with health costs, sickness and disability. In addition, the new health access scheme provides free G.P. (general practitioner) visits for children and low cost visits for adults receiving income support. Unlike the U.K., income support is paid in advance to ensure that low-income families have money for the coming week.

3.12.1 Senator S.Y. Mézec:

I am so staggered by that answer it is so difficult to come up with a supplementary question to that. Is the Chief Minister really saying that a rise in the use of foodbanks in the Island of 130 per cent, when in a wealthy society the use of foodbanks here should be zero per cent, that he thinks our welfare system is adequately providing for these people whose desperation is so great that they are having to rely on charities just to eat? Is that what he is really telling this wealthy society?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

No, and I think yet again the Senator, who I do usually have a lot of respect and time for, is playing a little bit for the headlines as well. Firstly, we have to understand what the background is to those increases. Secondly, if we use, for example, the United Kingdom as a comparable, on very rough and ready figures it would seem about 3, just under 4 per cent, of U.K. residents have accessed foodbanks in 2020-21 for at least 3 days. That is around, I think, 2.5 million, I believe. The Jersey position on a rough estimate is somewhere between 0.2 and 0.4 per cent, so what I am trying to say is that we need to understand it to see if it is an issue, but we do have a good income support system that is probably more accessible than the equivalent in the U.K. I think we also need to accept that on the Island we have a fantastic community, voluntary and honorary set of systems, which do provide certain services in a different way, and equally we have an income support system that, as I said, is probably a bit more generous than that of the U.K. as well.

[16:00]

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Sir, I can see a point of order, I believe.

The Bailiff:

I beg your pardon, point of order, Senator Moore.

Senator K.L. Moore:

Thank you. Not only did the Chief Minister take an excessive amount of time in providing us with some sort of an answer but that was not an answer to the question, if I may.

The Bailiff:

I am not sure that that is a point of order, but you are seeking a ruling. It seemed to me that the Chief Minister made a number of points relating to the foodbanks and made a comparison. His answer I think to Senator Mézec's point could be inferred but, of course, Senator Mézec does have a final supplementary question available to him at the end of this question, which undoubtedly he will use in the direction he feels that he wishes. The excessive amount of time, I am timing all of the answers. Some of them are running over one minute 30 seconds, some considerably, but quite often the questions have a lot of subdivisions within them. Given that we have a fair amount of time available to us, I am making allowances for those. But you are right, a number of Ministers have in their answers exceeded one minute 30 seconds and that is a practice we should try and avoid. Thank you very much, Senator.

3.12.2 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

Does the Minister agree that individuals accessing foodbanks can be done for various factors, not having enough income is one of them but also not being able to manage their finances well might also be another reason as to why individuals need to access foodbanks in Jersey? The solution to that particular problem is different again.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I think that would be a reasonable assumption and also demonstrates the point about understanding the position before jumping to conclusions.

3.12.3 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

I thank the Chief Minister for his response and is there a further complication in that understanding exercise that the Chief Minister wants to do in that those that provide the equivalent of foodbank services in Jersey, the robustness and the criteria that is used, is not consistent across all these providers and therefore actually gathering that data to understand what the drivers are is even more complex?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Again, I find myself in vehement agreement with the Deputy.

3.12.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Chief Minister praised our care system, income support system, for its work. Is he aware that if you are on income support after your rent is paid you are going to live, all in, on something like £130 a week? Could the Chief Minister estimate what his own consumption might be in such circumstances? Would he survive on £130 a week?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I am informed that a single person out of work would be on £156.87 a week after the rent was paid. I suggest that the Deputy's assertion at the beginning is incorrect.

3.12.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

£130 or £150, the question remains the same: could the Chief Minister survive, all in, for food, electric, transport, et cetera, after rent, on that sum?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I honestly cannot answer that question. For the purposes of food and electricity, I think on a limited lifestyle one probably can and the reason I put it that way around is obviously if one is on income support one will lead a different lifestyle to the one we lead when we are leading a fully employed and salaried lifestyle. The short answer, on the basis of a change in lifestyle, yes, I could.

3.12.6 Deputy R.J. Ward:

What does the Chief Minister consider as an acceptable level of foodbank usage and at what point he considers that people should have to go to foodbanks?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I do not think we should go into this territory of what point do I consider that people should go to foodbanks. We have had an exceptionally challenging 2 years and there are a low number of individuals, relative to the population of this Island, who have, for whatever reason, needed some extra support. We do not have the data to understand the full increase. It is possible, given that we have had some quite significant turmoil, particularly around employment, that people who ordinarily would be absolutely fine, have had gaps in their employment and have therefore needed help. I do remind the Deputy and Members that there have been a number of programmes that we have put in place over the last 2 years to help Islanders, whether it has been the extra £100 we gave to income support, whether it has been the 2 per cent reduction in social security or whether it has been the co-funded payroll scheme, we have done a lot, including previously reducing the cost of seeing a G.P. for low-income families. There is a lot of support that has been put out there and, compared to particularly our U.K. neighbours, I think we have supported Islanders well, as well as could ordinarily be expected.

3.12.7 Deputy R.J. Ward:

May I ask the Chief Minister what proportion of foodbank users does he believe are there, as suggested by one of his Assistant Ministers, because they simply cannot handle their finances and, by definition, he considers it to be their own fault?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Firstly, to pick up the last part of the Deputy's question, he is making an assertion because that was not inferred at all in the question put to me by Deputy Maçon. So if that is the Deputy's own interpretation, he can stand by that but I would not agree with that. Secondly, it is not helpful to speculate in the absence of data on the subject.

3.12.8 Senator S.Y. Mézec:

Is this not a case of *res ipsa loquitur* where the very fact that there are rising numbers of people using foodbanks is evidence that our welfare system is failing? Would the Chief Minister like to take the opportunity to say that as part of his commitment to reduce income inequality, not increase it as this statistic demonstrates has been the case in his tenure, that he would like to see a welfare

system that does not leave people relying on charity to make ends meet because the point of a welfare system is to keep people out of poverty, is it not?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I do not do that. I did not realise Latin was an allowable language in the Assembly, Sir.

The Bailiff:

Senator, *res ipsa loquitur* is a legal expression which means the facts speak for themselves.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Okay. I assume it is Latin, though. The point I had made earlier is that this Island, as I would hope many Members recognise, does do something slightly differently to jurisdictions Senator Mézec seems to favour often, for example the United Kingdom. As I said, we have a very strong and very welcome community, voluntary and honorary sector who do step in to help where there are gaps in the services that Government provides. To date I believe that input - for want of a better expression - from those sectors should be widely welcomed and, as I said, I do believe ... he asked me for my initial assessment and my initial assessment is our welfare system does protect the Islanders it is designed to protect.